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ABSTRACT

The third in a series of workshops on child care for low-income families (July 24, 1995) conceptualized directions for future research. The effect of child care on children's development was discussed in terms of: (1) child care as an intervention in the lives of low-income children; (2) the importance of capturing the dynamics of children's child care experiences; (3) expansion of the range of effects of child care examined in research beyond outcomes for individual children to include outcomes for families and others; and (4) development of a broader conception of child care quality that is relevant to current policy issues. Child care and economic self-sufficiency in the contexts of welfare reform and work and family issues was discussed. The child care policy environment in terms of how and by whom child care funds are allocated and how those decisions affect child care for low-income families was examined. Discussion of approaches to data collection confirmed the value of encouraging research that employs different methodologies. Contains 15 references. (AJH)

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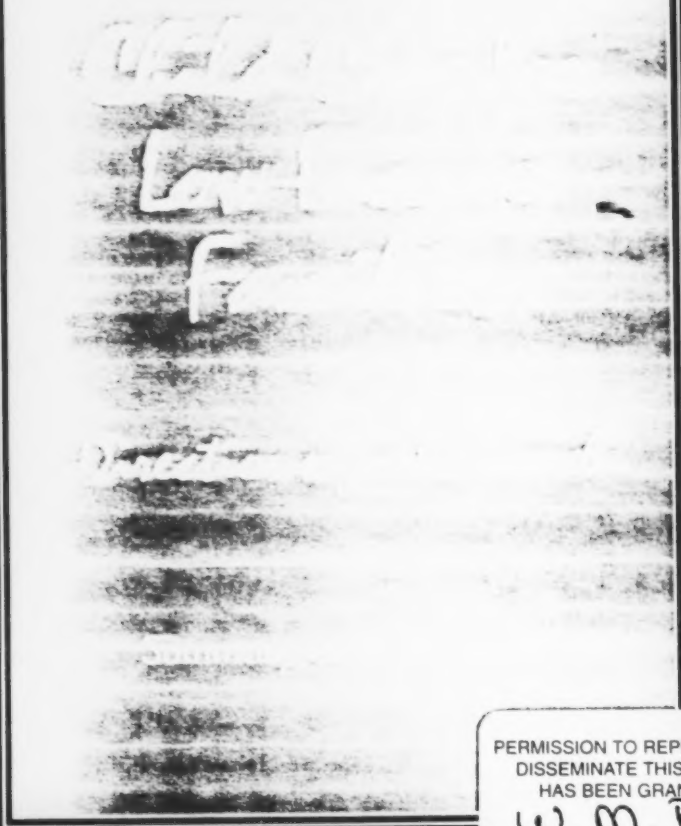

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Child Care for Low-Income Families

Directions for Research

Summary of a Workshop

Anne Bridgman and Deborah A. Phillips, Editors

Steering Committee on Child Care Workshops
Board on Children and Families

Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education
National Research Council

Institute of Medicine

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Preface

Families' reliance on child care has risen significantly over the past 30 years. In 1993, 9.9 million children under age 5 needed care while their mothers worked (Bureau of the Census, 1995); approximately 1.6 million of these children lived in families with monthly incomes below $1,500. Another 22.3 million children ages 5 to 14 have working mothers, and many of them require care outside school hours. More than two-thirds of all infants receive nonparental child care during their first year of life, with most enrolled for about 30 hours each week (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1995).

Increased national attention to child care has also been spurred by rising costs, renewed understanding of the importance of children's early experiences to future development, and problems experienced by states in serving all low-income families who are eligible for child care assistance. Child care for children in low-income families is of particular interest given current federal and state reforms in education and welfare that may boost the numbers of very young low-income children in need of child care, as well as put added pressures on preschools to pay more attention to preparing children for school.

To focus and advance discussion on these compelling issues, the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (the federal agency that administers national child care assistance programs) asked the Board on Children and Families of the

National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine to convene three workshops on child care for low-income families. The first two workshops, held in February and April 1995, sought to distill the conclusions available from current research about child care for low-income families, especially research conducted since the National Research Council's 1990 publication of *Who Cares for America's Children?* (Hayes et al., 1990), and examine the current status of the child care delivery system. Discussions from those workshops are summarized in a report entitled *Child Care for Low-Income Families: Summary of Two Workshops* (Phillips, 1995). That report addresses factors that affect low-income families' patterns of child care use; child care and children's development, including safety, quality, and continuity; child care and economic self-sufficiency; and the structure and consequences of child care subsidies.

The third workshop, which is the subject of this volume, considered promising directions for research on child care, using the issues raised at the first two workshops as a stepping-off point. Participants at that workshop (held in July 1995) stressed a belief in the value of research as a guide for policy developments in this area.

Participants at the third workshop represented a range of vantage points on data needs in the area of child care, including an interdisciplinary group of scholars who have studied child care and related issues, foundation representatives, federal agency heads and staff (including those in the social service and statistical agencies), congressional staff, and state and local child care administrators. Their charge: to identify promising directions for research on child care that cuts across disciplinary boundaries, integrates different data collection strategies, and establishes a closer articulation between the interests of those who conduct research and the information needs of those who use research to inform policy and practice.

The workshops' focal point was poor and low-income families who use typical community- and family-based child care arrangements, as distinct from enriched early intervention programs that also may serve as child care. *Low-income families* were defined to include the working and nonworking poor, as well as families living just above the poverty line. *Low income* was typically used to refer to families with incomes below $15,000, which now include one out of every four children under age 6 (Hernandez, 1995).

Jack P. Shonkoff, Chair
Steering Committee on Child Care Workshops

Child Care for Low-Income Families

Directions for Research

Contents

1 Introduction	1
2 Child Care and Children's Development	5
3 Child Care and Economic Self-Sufficiency	11
4 The Policy Environment in Child Care	15
5 Approaches to Data Collection	19
References	23
Appendix: Workshop Agenda	25
Other Reports from the Board on Children and Families	27

1

Introduction

Discussions by federal, state, and local policy makers about child care for low-income families have intensified, driven largely by reforms in welfare, schooling, and early childhood education that presage profound changes in the coming years. These debates raise critical questions about the costs, availability, and quality of child care. Amid growing pressures on public funds—and resulting discussions over whether to fund services or research—these debates also underscore the importance of identifying the most critical issues in child care for low-income children that warrant research attention.

In addition, as more child care administrators come to value research, there has been a growing recognition of the need to bring together various constituencies—local providers, consumers/parents, state and local administrators, academics/researchers, policy makers—to define an integrative agenda for research on child care from a range of complementary perspectives.[1]

Against this background, participants convened for the third in a series of workshops on child care for low-income families were asked to conceptualize directions for research, to map out areas in which future studies might be conducted. They were *not* asked to set priorities as they identified areas warranting further study, nor to assign value to areas for future study based solely on levels of existing knowledge. Furthermore, given the diverse areas of expertise represented, a large number of ideas were gener-

ated that could be neither fully developed nor integrated with each other in the course of a single day's meeting. Rather, the participants' ideas provide a first step toward a more definitive, targeted, and integrated discussion of directions for research on child care for low-income children.

During the course of the workshop, participants raised a number of issues, including whether to proceed with or depart from current priorities for research and how to make research choices in the current political climate and amid budget cutbacks. They also highlighted the value of connecting research on child care more closely to contemporary policy issues, especially the importance of examining both children's development and low-income parents' efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. They considered how to pursue an expanded knowledge base in child care research so that these and other compelling issues regarding low-income families are adequately addressed.

Participants cited additional challenges, including the need to recognize that the surging demand for child care is overwhelming the debate over quality; the importance of measuring the developmental effects of child care in the context of family and neighborhood influences on children's well-being; and the value of understanding how the marketplace for child care operates in low-income neighborhoods. Participants also discussed the merits of short- and long-term research agendas and suggested the benefit of conducting studies of child care from a consumer viewpoint as well as a macro policy perspective.

They raised questions about the magnitude of effects that can be ascribed to child care, as well as the extent of improvements in such areas as child care quality and the level of parents' purchasing power that is required in order to make an appreciable difference in children's lives (for example, the level of subsidy necessary to enhance parents' choices and provide them with expanded child care options).

Although there were many points of agreement, there were also disagreements. One discussion centered on doubts about the adequacy with which existing research on child care supports additional public investments in this area: one participant questioned the relative value of investing in child care rather than spending diminishing resources on efforts to decrease child poverty and increase families' well-being. Participants also disagreed on the need to continue to study—or, in some cases, evaluate anew—some of the more long-standing issues related to child care, such as quality. Some participants suggested that past research has not adequately documented the importance of quality in child care for low-income fami-

lies, and called for future research to more fully address this issue. But others disagreed, noting that existing studies have adequately shown the value of high-quality care to children's development and suggesting that future research focus on other, more compelling issues that have been relatively neglected in the research literature on child care.

In considering directions for research, participants also pointed to the importance of identifying areas that have already been studied adequately, of distinguishing between areas of research for which there is adequate evidence and areas for which evidence is lacking. One participant cited the need to distinguish between research conducted because there is something to learn and studies done to shore up what has previously been demonstrated but that requires more convincing evidence. He challenged researchers to ask "What do we wish we knew?" as distinct from "On what issues would we like to have more persuasive evidence?" The question of whether to address long-standing issues or carve out new areas of research was left as a central challenge to those who fund future research on child care for low-income families.

Many of the participants agreed strongly on the need to more firmly tie future child care research to public policy, based in part on a better understanding of what policy research is and how it differs from child development research that is not explicitly directed toward policy questions. They also suggested linking studies of child care to those on related policy issues, such as Head Start, early childhood education, youth development, and after-school care. One participant called for connecting child care outcomes to variables that can be manipulated by policy, such as costs through subsidies, quality through regulations and training, and supply through various funding strategies (Hayes et al., 1990; Gormley, 1995).

A number of participants raised the issue of communicating the message of child care research to policy makers and the public as one of investing in human capital. Although used effectively in the early intervention arena, this framework has not been applied to child care. Several participants called for calculating the costs to society of exposing children to unstable and low-quality child care; if outcomes such as school failure, criminal behavior, and loss of productivity can be attributed to poor child care quality, then the costs need to be estimated and publicized, they said.

Over the course of the one-day workshop, the discussion of a research agenda for child care for low-income children fell into four distinct areas, which provide the structure of this report:

- Child care and children's development (Chapter 2);
- Child care and economic self-sufficiency (Chapter 3);
- The policy environment in child care (Chapter 4); and
- Approaches to data collection (Chapter 5).

The Board on Children and Families hopes that this report, along with its predecessor, provides a framework for continued considerations of a research agenda that can inform efforts to meet the needs of children whose parents are working or preparing for work.

2

Child Care and Children's Development

THE ISSUE IN BRIEF

Research presented at the first two workshops on child care for low-income families (Phillips, 1995) points to a relatively small supply of care for infants and school-age children, for children with disabilities and special health care needs, and for parents with unconventional or shifting work hours. These scarcities exacerbate other barriers that low-income families experience in matching the type of care used with the features of care that best meet their needs.

Moreover, the quality of care available to low-income families is highly variable; quality matters because, as numerous observational studies have demonstrated, variation in quality has discernible effects on children's development, *perhaps more so for low-income children*. A sizable minority of the care arrangements available to low-income children falls into a range of quality that some conclude may compromise development, and there is a very limited supply of arrangements at the high end of the quality spectrum. Children from low-income families who are in home-based child care—particularly those that are exclusively dependent on maternal income—are more likely to be enrolled in poorer-quality arrangements than are their higher-income peers. Inequities in access to quality do not appear to characterize center-based care, in part because some low-income families have access to part-day, center-based early intervention programs

that emphasize the delivery of comprehensive, high-quality care (e.g., Head Start) (Phillips, 1995).

Unstable child care affects all families, but poor and low-income families are unduly affected by irregular and shifting work schedules, marginal employment, and in some cases, the financial necessity of relying on fragile and therefore unstable child care arrangements. Instability of care is of special concern for infants, a third of whom experience at least three different arrangements in the first year of life (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1995).

This constellation of issues regarding equity of access to stable, beneficial child care is an especially promising area for further research given its significant implications for the policy choices that must inevitably be made between using subsidies to expand low-income families' access to care or to upgrade the quality and reliability of the care that already exists. Are there cumulative effects, over time, that derive from the modest but pervasive effects of poor-quality care on children's social, language, health, and cognitive development? What are the ripple or contagion effects associated with poor-quality child care arrangements when, for example, the behavioral problems of one or two children exposed to these environments affect the dynamics of an entire classroom? What is known about how children's home and child care environments interact to affect development, particularly at the extremes of quality? And what are the effects of variation in the quality and continuity of care on the quality and consistency of childrearing that parents are able to provide?

DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Participants in the third workshop, in their discussions on the effect of child care on children's development, addressed four general areas: (1) the role of child care as an intervention in the lives of low-income children; (2) the importance of capturing the dynamics of children's child care experiences; (3) expansion of the range of effects of child care examined in research beyond outcomes for individual children to include families, communities, peer groups, schools, and others (effects on families' work are addressed in Chapter 3); and (4) development of a broader conception of child care quality that is relevant to current policy issues.

Child Care as Intervention

Several participants noted that child care is often a focus of research on low-income families because it is considered an avenue of intervention

in the lives of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This viewpoint highlights the importance of narrowing the traditional divide between the research on early intervention programs (those that are specifically designed to compensate for perceived environmental deficiencies, that typically operate on part-day schedules, and that provide comprehensive services) and the research on full-day child care that, until recently, has tended to be seen as not providing the same potential for enrichment. High-quality child care can provide children from disadvantaged backgrounds with developmental screening, health assessments, and access to educational materials; poor-quality care may compound the potentially detrimental influences of other aspects of disadvantaged environments.

The participants cautioned that an accurate portrayal of child care requires that the influence of child care be examined in conjunction with other influences on children's lives, such as their home environments, neighborhoods, and access to health care and other services; most research on child care has examined the influence of child care apart from other influences on children's lives. The major challenge to future research on these questions, according to workshop participants, is that of measuring the effects of child care not in isolation, but in conjunction with other important influences on children's health and development. In fact, one of the most basic challenges to existing research that was raised at the workshop was the question of the relative influence of child care—in the broader scheme of all influences on children's lives—in affecting such larger issues as child poverty, children's long-term development, and family well-being.

Participants suggested that future research consider what short- and long-term effects child care has on the lives of low-income children and how much of an intervention is needed to make a difference. They also noted the importance of addressing the value-added effect on low-income children of components of some child care arrangements, such as developmental screening, health assessments, and access to educational materials. Several participants suggested that studies should ask how child care and home environments interact and how they modify, potentiate, or compensate for each others' influence (what happens, for example, when children take part in high-quality child care for part of the day, then spend the remainder of their time in unsupportive home or child care environments?).

Capturing the Dynamics of Child Care Experiences for Children

Child care is not a single intervention in children's lives. Rather, children move in and out of different child care arrangements and experience multiple arrangements simultaneously over the course of their early childhood years. Growing evidence that children experience more than one child care arrangement in their childhood years poses challenges to the typical approach of assessing one arrangement at one point in time and assuming that this adequately captures the effects of child care on development.

One workshop participant noted the need for research to identify the variety of naturally occurring child care configurations, such as the link between part-day Head Start and the child care used for the rest of the day, or the blends of relative and family day care that many families rely on, in order to better capture the realities of families' child care arrangements. Another participant cited the need for studies that address the processes that underlie parents' child care choices over the course of time that they rely on nonparental care. Other participants pointed to the importance of examining the sequencing of child care arrangements across the early childhood and school-age years—identifying mixes of arrangements and the times and places that transitions occurred—rather than looking at single settings experienced by children at isolated points in time.

Expansion of Child Care Effects

As more and younger children spend increasing amounts of time with caregivers who are not family members and the very role of child care changes from one of providing supplemental experiences to one of providing basic socialization, researchers will need to reconsider the narrow range of outcomes that are typically included in child care studies. Moving beyond individual effects on children, participants suggested, studies will have to consider different units of analysis, such as the family (including siblings), the community, peer groups, and the school, among other variables.

Researchers could look at how child care choices are affected by family structure and, in turn, affect the childrearing dynamics within families. At the community level, little is known about whether and how various characteristics of the child care that is available to low-income families affects such community characteristics as neighborhood safety, rates of

parental employment, the local epidemiology of child health, aggregate school readiness, special education enrollment, and school dropout rates.

Furthermore, several speakers noted, as child care assumes a more pervasive role in America's increasingly culturally diverse society, researchers will need to expand the array of outcomes measured to take into consideration such issues as child care providers' efforts to preserve families' cultures, to teach English as a second language, and to adopt multicultural approaches. Useful assessments of child care environments will increasingly need to consider the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic mix of the children in care, and the corresponding backgrounds of their child care providers (see Phillips and Crowell, 1994, for further discussion of these issues). A fundamental challenge in this area concerns the basic ingredients of quality care; what is developmentally beneficial for one child may not be so beneficial for another.

The Policy Relevance of Quality

Several participants suggested the need to broaden the conception of quality in the next generation of studies of child care to include more policy-relevant considerations. They noted the need to rectify the relative inattention paid to informal child care arrangements, to consider more policy-relevant indices (e.g., reimbursement rates relative to cost of care, access to public and private subsidies, participation in state and local quality improvement initiatives), and to consider aspects of the surrounding community that provide an infrastructure for high-quality care. Especially in the current climate of financial cutbacks, some suggested that it would be wise to conduct cost-benefit analyses similar to those that have applied to early intervention programs (e.g., Barnett, 1985) and to examine the returns to the community of investing in child care.

In the context of discussing quality, one participant proposed that the main issue was one of identifying thresholds of quality—that is, those levels below which children's development is compromised and above which developmental gains occur, as well as thresholds of quality beyond which there are diminishing returns of investments in quality. This approach to assessing the developmental effects of variations in quality is distinct from the correlational analyses that dominate the research literature; it would shift the general debate from one of "more is better" to one of "how much is good enough," which participants cited as a more pertinent question in today's policy context. The speaker also suggested that research be con-

ducted in coordination with child care resource and referral agencies that maintain sizable databases on the local supply and characteristics of child care, as well as in conjunction with monitoring activities that are carried out by regulatory agencies and also involve data collection.

Future research should assess the critical dimensions of quality for informal child care arrangements and determine what strategies—short of regulation and accreditation—improve the quality of informal care, participants suggested. Researchers could study how quality is attained in the informal market and via whom—regulators, consumers, policy makers—in order to identify the most effective mechanisms for improving quality, such as training, regulation, consumer education, accreditation, and improved provider compensation. Lessons have been learned about successful means of improving quality of care in more formal child care settings, such as child care centers and regulated family day care homes (see, for example, Smith et al., 1995; Larner, 1994); the next step involves extending this work to informal arrangements and determining what conditions are necessary to sustain the positive effects of quality improvement efforts, several participants noted.

3

Child Care and Economic Self-Sufficiency

THE ISSUE IN BRIEF

Considerations of child care have moved to center stage in federal and state debates about welfare reform. It is well understood that any effort to encourage or mandate work effort on behalf of the population receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) will have the effect of placing more young children in child care and expanding the time that children spend in child care. Unless there are exemptions for mothers with very young children, many of these children are likely to be infants and toddlers.

This, in turn, raises questions regarding the child care environments that these children will be exposed to when they are not in the care of their parents. Some view this as an opportunity to support child care environments that not only will enable parents to work, but also will benefit children, help prepare them for school, and perhaps reduce the odds of welfare dependence in the next generation. Others, faced with pressures to control public costs that typically accompany welfare reform initiatives, are forced to think in terms of the minimum amount that can be done so that child care costs and problems do not interfere with the primary government cost reduction aims of reform initiatives.

Beyond the welfare context, much of the evidence indicates that employed, single mothers who are poor or near poverty face particular hard-

ships in their efforts to combine work and childrearing. The working poor are also the least likely of *all* income groups to receive assistance with their child care costs (Hofferth, 1995). And they are less likely to receive public assistance for child care than mothers who receive AFDC and middle-class families that can benefit from the child care income tax credit.

Research presented at the first two workshops (Phillips, 1995) indicates that child care plays a pivotal role in keeping parents employed, as well as in helping those on public assistance move into the paid labor force. Access to free or low-cost care or, absent this, to financial assistance with child care fees appears to be a critical element of successful efforts to promote economic self-sufficiency among families with young children. But the cost of care is not the only issue that warrants careful consideration in efforts to promote self-sufficiency. It appears that attention to issues of safety, reliability, and parental trust in the provider, as well as efforts to help parents make arrangements that correspond to their preferences, are important as well.

Participants in the first two workshops emphasized that efforts to understand the distribution of low-income families across differing types and qualities of child care warrant careful attention, particularly insofar as they are linked to the capacity of low-income parents to prepare for, acquire, and sustain employment (Phillips, 1995).

DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Participants at the third workshop addressed two general areas in discussing child care and economic self-sufficiency: (1) child care in the context of welfare reform and (2) child care in the context of work and family issues.

Child Care in the Context of Welfare Reform

Participants generally agreed that federal and state discussions of welfare reform, as well as current changes in state welfare policy, present a timely opportunity to increase attention to the need for child care research. They also agreed that these changes provide opportunities to conduct research on child care from a broader perspective and to better integrate research on child care and on welfare.

Welfare reform initiatives offer researchers a chance to take advantage of naturally occurring experiments to examine the role of child care in welfare reform, one participant noted. In this context, communities

that are adopting different strategies for providing child care to low-income families and those that have made different levels of investments in child care provide opportunities for comparison in studies that consider child care from a variety of perspectives. If some consistency in data collection across states is to be encouraged, it will be important to identify a few key child care variables that could be included in efforts to monitor and evaluate the effects of welfare reform. In this context, it is also essential to break down the barriers that currently exist between examinations of welfare, education, child care, and health care.

Another participant agreed, suggesting that researchers add questions about child care to existing evaluations of welfare demonstrations. Particularly useful would be efforts to track families' child care arrangements and their progress toward the work-related goals of self-sufficiency programs simultaneously over time in order to decipher the reciprocal interactions between parents' efforts to move into the labor force and to ensure the well-being of their children. Among the numerous important policy questions regarding the role of child care in welfare reform: Under what conditions does child care help or hinder the employment-related goals of welfare reform? What role is played by transitional child care? By exempt care (care that is not required to be regulated)? What features of child care (type, stability, quality) and parental perceptions of care are most strongly associated with parents' long- and short-term efforts to attain self-sufficiency? Participants noted a need for observational studies of child care quality in the context of welfare initiatives to counteract the prevailing reliance on parental reports of quality, which are not adequate proxies.

Workshop participants suggested a number of avenues for future research in the context of welfare reform. Studies could address how to further identify the role played by child care—its quality, stability, costs, and accessibility—in low-income parents' efforts to prepare for and maintain employment. Researchers could aim to identify what elements of child care and of the workplace (e.g., wages, work schedules, social organization and climate of the workplace)—and of the relation between the two (e.g., hours of work and hours of child care)—increase the likelihood that low-income parents will succeed in becoming economically self-sufficient.

Some participants suggested that researchers consider how variations in levels and structure of subsidies affect low-income parents' ability to move from job training to job entry and sustained employment. Others called for studies that look at how the relation between subsidy levels and

families' changing income levels affects parents' progression into the labor market, and how families are affected when the receipt of subsidies ends and parents begin to pay for child care once they enter the labor force. Participants also called for more research on families whose names appear on state waiting lists for child care but, because the lists are frequently very long, do not obtain child care; families who "disappear" from normal tracking mechanisms; and families who lose or experience gaps in subsidies.

Child Care in the Context of Work and Family Issues

By embedding child care research in an even broader context, so that it includes family and work issues as a whole, more could be learned about the effect on families' child care arrangements of low-wage jobs, unpredictable and inflexible work schedules, modest medical and family leave policies, and frequent job changes. The displacement of child care from working-poor families to welfare recipients (documented in the first two workshops on child care for low-income families), notably its effects on parents' motivation and capacity to sustain employment, also warrants research attention. How do low-income parents' perceptions of the trade-offs they must make between work, child care, and attention to family matters influence their choice of child care? How do their perceptions of these trade-offs influence their willingness to do what is necessary to maintain some low-wage jobs (e.g., travel long distances, work nonstandard hours)? Do low-skilled and entry-level jobs that offer parents more predictable work hours and greater flexibility in connection with family needs than is typically the case result in less job turnover, improved retention, and lower rates of absenteeism?

Workshop participants also suggested that research focus to a greater extent on the role of child care as a viable source of employment for low-income women. Studies could seek to determine under what conditions child care work contributes to the career development of low-income women, to families' economic self-sufficiency, and to stable and developmentally beneficial child care.

4

The Policy Environment in Child Care

THE ISSUE IN BRIEF

The reduction of poverty has provided the most long-standing rationale for child care policies in the United States. This goal, however, has not generated a coherent child care policy. Rather, a collection of federal child care policies has accumulated over time, with different funding streams targeted to different subgroups within the low-income population. The vast majority of funds provide subsidies to families to facilitate their access to child care; efforts to improve the quality of child care are of much lower priority. Despite the fact that federal subsidies for child care have expanded greatly in recent years, they remain inadequate to serve the large number of families who are nominally eligible for support.

The consequences of this current structure of federal support for child care for low-income families were topics of much discussion at the first two workshops on child care for low-income families (Phillips, 1995). In particular, participants at those workshops examined the consequences of funding scarcity and of the fragmentation that characterizes federal child care subsidies for low-income families in terms of families' access to and affordability of child care and the quality and continuity of care. Among the questions examined were: (1) What trade-offs do state agencies face when deciding how to allocate funds across nonworking and working-poor families, and between helping families pay for care and improving the qual-

ity of care? (2) What is known about how families construct their child care arrangements as they move from one funding stream to another? (3) How might the current child care system at the state level be affected if the federal government consolidates the direct child care funding programs and assigns greater responsibility for allocating these funds to the states?

In the years ahead, states and localities will be faced with an array of new responsibilities that encompass the design of service delivery, benefit structures and eligibility criteria, finance reform, the amount of public monies that will be dedicated to children and families, the distribution of these resources across families with differing financial and human resources, and standards of accountability. Decisions concerning the structure and allocation of resources for child care will be a salient item on the agendas of state legislators, governors, and administrators of state and local service agencies.

Furthermore, the role of state governments as managers of scientific data on children and families is likely to grow. In order to address the domestic issues for which they are now increasingly responsible, the states will be required to increase their competence as managers of scientific information and to develop models of cooperation with other states, the federal government, and the research community.

DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

With these new responsibilities in mind, participants at the third workshop addressed two general areas related to the policy environment in child care: (1) how child care funds are allocated and by whom, and (2) how those decisions affect the supply, affordability, quality, and continuity of child care for low-income families.

Allocation of Child Care Resources

Workshop participants agreed that the structure of public investments in child care is in extraordinary flux amid mounting pressure for consolidation, growing recognition of the adverse effects of fragmentation, and increasing devolution of power from the federal government to the states. They also noted that these factors pose critical challenges to the existing research agenda, making it more crucial than ever to understand the context within which policy choices are made.

Participants noted the importance of research that addresses how states structure their different child care subsidy programs, and what factors en-

ter into these policy, funding, and allocation decisions, broadening both the subjects and the constituency for research to include state legislators and child care administrators. One participant cited the need for research to draw together the many elements of policy debates that touch on children but that are often addressed in isolation from one another. How, in other words, do decisions that affect child care but are debated in the larger context of education, welfare, and health care influence or fail to influence each other?

Additional research should be done, participants said, to determine what factors guide state choices in spending child care block grant funds (e.g., budgets, political priorities, conflicts between political parties, the relative strengths of lobbying groups, the history of child care funding in the state). Investigations could determine, for example, how state policy makers make trade-offs between serving welfare families and serving non-welfare families when both groups have low income, are working, and need child care assistance; between serving more families with smaller amounts of assistance or fewer families with more assistance; and between funding more child care subsidies to families and improvements in the quality of child care for low-income families.

The Effect of Policy Decisions on Child Care

Workshop participants also called for research that assesses how the broader policy context within which government child care funds are provided—including considerations of welfare, Head Start, and tax benefits—affects the child care market in low-income neighborhoods. Studies are needed that determine how the immediate policy context influences the options that are available to low-income families, including such factors as the availability and affordability of care. Among the features of care that warrant examination, they said, are the relative supply of regulated and nonregulated arrangements in low-income communities, the cost of care relative to reimbursement rates, and the proportion of care settings that accept subsidized children.

Research should also assess the effect of policy decisions on the quality and continuity of care, participants said, noting recent efforts to study the effects of regulatory changes as an example (e.g., the Florida Quality Improvement Study, which is addressed in more detail in Chapter 5—Howes et al., 1995). And it should address how child care providers respond to various policies and changes in those policies, including how they allocate

resources within their programs across staff salaries, capital costs, scholarships, and supplies and materials, for example.

The effects of policy trade-offs on the constraints that currently affect families' child care options are also important to document, participants noted. Researchers need to examine how parents obtain information about their eligibility for child care subsidies and why some eligible parents fail to take advantage of subsidies, they said. Other issues that were discussed as warranting research attention included changes in the distribution of subsidies across nonworking and equally low-income working families, changes in the proportion of family income spent on child care in different socioeconomic groups, and effects on the work effort and capacity to maintain employment of families with differing access to subsidized child care. As before, the participants highlighted the importance of examining the effects of child care policy relative to other influences on these families' lives.

A final issue that surfaced in discussions of the policy environment of child care concerned the capacity of states and localities to learn from their experiences as they reexamine the allocation of child care resources. What tracking and monitoring systems exist at the state and local levels to provide information about the ramifications of their decisions? How might the research community contribute to the quality, cross-state consistency, and uses of information systems? What mechanisms exist for connecting administrative data of this nature to the broader research literature on child care? These questions are taken up in the next chapter.

5

Approaches to Data Collection

In addition to discussing the issues and frameworks that should guide the substance of future research on child care for low-income families, participants at the third workshop addressed the process of research, asking what approaches to data collection are needed to generate useful answers to contemporary questions about child care.

Participants agreed on the value of encouraging research that employs different methodologies—short- and long-term studies; large and small datasets; analyses of administrative data; collections of qualitative data from providers, parents, and administrators, for example—because each approach fulfills different goals. The question is no longer which method to use, but how different methods can be used in conjunction to complement one another, they said.

The participants also stressed the need to be more deliberate about integrating different methods within single studies, as well as about coordinating analytic work and the dissemination of findings across studies. One participant noted, for example, that different analytic strategies applied to the same data can produce different conclusions. Multifaceted studies that integrate ethnographic and experimental methods, build questions into administrative databases, and embed intensive, focused studies into national surveys—as was done with the JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training) evaluation (Moore et al., in press) and the Teenage

Parent Welfare Demonstration (Aber et al., 1995)—were noted repeatedly as promising avenues to pursue.

Trade-offs were also highlighted between initiating new research projects and supplementing existing studies and between funding major experiments or longitudinal studies of child care and supporting lower-cost, smaller-scale projects. For example, noting the significant benefits of high-quality child care, one participant suggested a new longitudinal study that looks specifically at low-income children in widely varying qualities of child care, but others disagreed, noting the adequacy of existing studies—notably the NICHD Study of Early Child Care on child care quality (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1995). Another participant suggested studying the differences between communities that vary in their supply of high-quality child care for such outcomes as poverty rates, welfare receipt, and school readiness. More modest suggestions included adding a few questions to ongoing national surveys (e.g., the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, the Survey of Income and Program Participation, and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics), supporting site-specific studies of local variation in child care markets, and identifying outputs of programmatic and policy initiatives (e.g., number of licensing code violations) that are hypothesized to affect outcomes for children and families. In this context, one participant noted the benefits that could be reaped if families' employment and child care histories, with dates, were added to existing surveys to track co-occurring patterns of employment and child care.

Given that state and local policies are likely to have a growing influence on the child care that is available to low-income families, the participants devoted considerable time to discussing the value of directing research toward state and local evaluation efforts, as well as to the importance of identifying research opportunities that are presented by state and local policies that affect child care. Examples cited at the workshop as models for the future include research projects that have studied the effects on the quality of care and child outcomes of naturally occurring changes in state child care regulations (e.g., the Florida Quality Improvement Study—Howes et al., 1995), and embedded studies of child care in statewide welfare reform experiments (e.g., the GAIN Family Life and Child Care Study—Meyers, 1992).

On a related topic, participants also discussed the value and shortcomings of state and local administrative databases as a source of data on child care. While common in the welfare reform literature, the child care field has neither mined nor supplemented administrative data as a poten-

tially useful research strategy. Speakers noted opportunities to forge partnerships between academic researchers and federal and state child care agencies, resource and referral agencies, and others who manage local databases. They also cited the need for efforts aimed at improving the comparability of data across local and state databases. One participant suggested that a good starting point would be to select a couple of states with relatively advanced data systems to try out strategies for enhancing uniformity and cross-site ties. But because states have different systems and different administrative needs, one participant cautioned, researchers should be cognizant of the difficulties involved in this type of work even when good intentions prevail.

Other needs for improved integration and collaboration were also highlighted by the workshop participants. If efforts to understand what is happening in and because of child care are to be placed in the context of other influences on children's development and parents' efforts to provide economic support for their families, then it is essential that research on child care become much more closely articulated with research in related fields—research on poverty, Head Start and early childhood and elementary education, child health, community and neighborhood influences, labor economics, and family structure. Encouraging interdisciplinary research is one means of bringing multiple vantage points to bear on child care research; major strides in this area—notably between psychologists and economists—have revealed both the opportunities and tensions that characterize efforts to bridge disciplines.

Participants agreed that a central challenge for the future is to identify effective and enduring mechanisms for fostering integrative research on child care—not only across disciplines, but between researchers and practitioners, between research that is funded by public agencies and private sources, and across states. They also agreed that child care research needs to be viewed and planned as a coherent enterprise, rather than as a collection of isolated research endeavors, and that it should be logically sequenced and designed to address the important issues that emerge over time.

Several participants questioned the meaning of integrative approaches to research in terms of funding mechanisms for child care research. They also raised questions about effective incentives for collaborative research, barriers to the cross-agency development and funding of research agendas, and ways to encourage continued dialogue rather than one-time collaborations on single studies. Participants suggested looking to other fields to learn lessons from attempts to establish more coherent research enterprises.

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Appendix

WORKSHOP ON CHILD CARE FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

July 24, 1995

National Research Council
Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education
Institute of Medicine
Board on Children and Families
Cecil and Ida Green Building
Room 130, 2001 Wisconsin Avenue
Washington, D.C.

8:30-9:00	**Continental Breakfast**	
9:00-9:30	**Welcome and Introductory Remarks** *Speaker:* **Jack Shonkoff**, Brandeis University	
9:30-10:00	**Participant Introductions**	
10:00-11:15	**Discussion: Issues for Ongoing and New Empirical Research**	
	Introductory Remarks:	**Lawrence Mead**, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University **Heidi Hartmann**, Institute for Women's Policy Research
11:15-11:30	**Break**	
11:30-12:30	**Continued Discussion of Empirical Research**	

12:30-1:30 **Lunch**

1:30-2:45 **Discussion: Future Evaluation Research**
Introductory Remarks: **Christine Ross**, Mathematica Policy Research Inc.

2:45-3:00 **Break**

3:00-4:00 **Discussion: Data Needs for Program/Policy Monitoring**
Introductory Remarks: **Bruce Liggett,** Arizona Department of Economic Security
Joan Lombardi, Administration for Children and Families (HHS)

4:00-5:00 **Summary of Proposed Research Agenda**
Speakers: **Deborah Stipek**, University of California, Los Angeles
Larry Bumpass, University of Wisconsin

Final Reactions from Workshop Participants

5:00-5:15 **Closing Remarks**
Speaker: **Jack Shonkoff**

OTHER REPORTS FROM THE BOARD ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

America's Fathers and Public Policy: Report of a Workshop (1994)

Protecting and Improving the Quality of Care for Children Under Health Care Reform: Workshop Highlights (with the Board on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention of the Institute of Medicine) (1994)

Benefits and Systems of Care for Maternal and Child Health: Workshop Highlights (with the Board on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention of the Institute of Medicine) (1994)

Cultural Diversity and Early Education: Report of a Workshop (1994)

New Findings on Children, Families, and Economic Self-Sufficiency: Summary of a Research Briefing (1995)

Child Care for Low-Income Families: Summary of Two Workshops (1995)

Integrating Federal Statistics on Children: Report of a Workshop (with the Committee on National Statistics of the National Research Council) (1995)

"Immigrant Children and Their Families: Issues for Research and Policy" in *The Future of Children* (summer/fall 1995, v. 5, no. 2)

Service Provider Perspectives on Family Violence Interventions: Proceedings of a Workshop (1995)